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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SUVA 000244

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL PGOV FJ

SUBJECT: BAINIMARAMA RECEIVES "UNDERSTANDING" FROM
MELANESIAN LEADERS

REF: SUVA 224

Classified By: DCM Ted Mann, per 1.5 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary. A dispirited Papua New Guinea High Commissioner to Fiji, Peter Eafeare, described the May 29-30 Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) Summit in Vanuatu as a setback in the effort to ensure Fiji's interim government (IG) holds elections as promised next March. Language in the Summit Joint Communique expressing the leaders understanding of the situation in Fiji and extending support for the IG's "objective of building a better Fiji," will likely be portrayed by the IG as an endorsement of the People's Charter process Bainimarama has stated will take precedence over elections. Eafeare said the MSG stance will likely complicate efforts to keep the pressure on Fiji at the upcoming Pacific Island Forum Leaders' Meeting in Niue. End summary.

MSG Communique Stresses Understanding of Fiji Situation;
Appears to Endorse People's Charter Process

¶2. (C) PNG High Commissioner Eafeare shared with us today a copy of the Joint Communique from the 17th Melanesian Spearhead Group Leaders' Summit, held in Port Vila, Vanuatu May 29-30. (We are sending a scanned copy of the Communique to EAP/ANP via unclassified e-mail.) As noted reftel, Fiji media reports from Port Vila had indicated that Bainimarama received a sympathetic response to his explanations for the 2006 coup and his vision for Fiji's future. Eafeare said the language the MSG leaders adopted in the Communique does not merely express sympathy or understanding; it could be viewed as a positive endorsement of the interim regime's policies. The Communique states:

"Leaders expressed their understanding of the situation and extended support to Fiji towards their efforts in re-engaging with Pacific members, dialogue partners and other friends to achieve the objectives of building a better Fiji."

¶3. (C) While the above language does not specifically mention the People's Charter, the meaning is clear, since Charter is being drafted by the "National Council for Building a Better Fiji" (NCBBF). Eafeare said that by focusing on the Charter, the Communique language undercuts the Pacific Island Forum's and his own personal efforts as Chair of the Forum-Fiji Joint Working Group to keep steady pressure on the IG to hold free and fair elections no later than March 2009. Even the section of the Communique on elections, he said, was sugar-coated, listing the various actions the IG has taken to prepare for elections (completing a census; appointing a Deputy Supervisor of Elections, etc.) but avoiding reference to the many delays and roadblocks to elections devised by the IG. (Note: Eafeare said IG Foreign

Minister Nailatikau had a direct hand in drafting some of the Communiqué, going so far as to dictate the list of IG accomplishments contained in the document.) Eafeare said he thoroughly briefed PNG PM Somare on election related problems but the PM and his counterparts chose to accent only the positive. The only advice of Eafeare's the PMs chose to take was a positive reference to the Forum Foreign Ministers' outcome statement from their meeting in Auckland earlier in the year. In that statement, the Foreign Ministers were quite firm in holding Fiji to the early 2009 election deadline.

MSG Stance Complicating the Forum's Work?

¶4. (C) Eafeare told us the MSG stance would undoubtedly encourage the IG to press for a more "understanding" response from Forum Leaders in Niue this August. He hopes that does not happen and noted that he "has a lot of work to do" to ensure his own government does not repeat the "mistakes it made in Vanuatu." Eafeare insisted that he would characterize the MSG language to his IG interlocutors as just that - a mistake.

Comment - Forum Needs to Keep the Pressure On

¶5. (C) Keeping the pressure on Bainimarama in Niue is more important than ever given the disappointing actions of MSG leaders in Vanuatu. We know that Australia, New Zealand and Pacific Island states like Samoa will hold up their end of the bargain. Whether PNG, Vanuatu, the Solomons and others (including current Forum Chair Tonga) will do likewise

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remains unclear.

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